

Critical Study

Title: *Axiologie et théologie*

Translator's rendering of the title: *Axiology and Theology*.

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Translator's note: No Greek (or Latin) appears anywhere in this article — it is a French-language critical study of a French thesis, with citations only to other modern French/Swiss authors. No transcription-and-gloss apparatus was therefore needed; every quoted passage below is translated in full.

AXIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

If Christianity brings a new vision of the world and a regeneration of man, it must indeed imply a metamorphosis and a new justification of values. There is, then, a theological problem of values. It is to this that M. Gabriel-Philippe Widmer has applied himself in his thesis: *Les valeurs et leur signification théologique* [Values and Their Theological Significance].¹

The author skillfully sets aside the presuppositions that would distort his meditation. He is careful not to assert that values come to the subject already fully formed, or that they can be detached from the act of evaluation. Nor does he believe that the mind invents them arbitrarily or gratuitously, apart from any relation to a transcendence and to a situation. The mind posits itself as a reference to an other, under a regulative motion. It is nothing outside this élan and this confrontation. It can define and grasp itself only through its objects, just as these objects are what they are only through its objectifying act. It is precisely in this mastery of a resistance by an exigency that values are born. If every mind is a universe, every subject is at the same time a heaven of values.

One must therefore renounce the hope of a completed system that would enclose facts, truths, and norms within a seamless objectivity. Such a system might perhaps explain everything except the act that gives it being — along with the preconceptions and the surmounted oppositions that this kind of construction presupposes. Thought that believes itself absorbed in its own theory forgets that it is a militant action. It loses sight of its own ascent toward rationality, an ascent that starts from what is not yet rational. Action presupposes a duality that a closed system would contradict.

‘... The very effort to achieve a synthesis,’ writes Mlle Pétrement, ‘presupposes that one excludes something, that one struggles against something, so that we cannot conceive, or even will, under the conditions in which we find ourselves, a

total synthesis... Unity is necessarily unfinished because the subject's action is inseparable from thought.¹

There will, then, be no values independent of the judgment that recognizes them. But since judgment is not pure creation, since it is a grasping and shaping of a given that lends itself or refuses itself, one could say that the subject *actualizes* values, and that the given is a possibility of assuming this or that order — a more or less determinate condition of the value-forming elaboration.

One should not draw an adequate distinction between judgments of existence and judgments of value. No affirmation, indeed, posits a simple existence; it always also posits a determination relative to a norm. Every structuring implies a hierarchization, brings relations into play, and thus presupposes evaluations.² But these evaluations can establish degrees that are homogeneous from the point of view that concerns us here. Such, for example, are mathematical judgments, in which negative quantities carry no pejorative appraisal. M. Arnold Reymond accordingly calls these 'univalent.' Other evaluations, by contrast, distribute their objects according to two antithetical ways of being, of which one is perfection and the other defect. These are M. Reymond's 'bivalent' judgments: they decide between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, true and false.

Values are relations between a given, a thought, and norms. There will, then, be as many values as there are types of relation permitted or suggested by the given. One can evaluate a human action according to biological, economic, aesthetic, ethical, or religious criteria... But it is evident that a thought, insofar as it is an act, does not fall under mathematical evaluation, and that a number cannot, without artifice, take on ethico-religious modalities, as the Pythagoreans would have had it.

Progress consists precisely in differentiating, in an ever more precise way, the orders of value and the conditions of their actualization. In primitive societies, sociological, moral, and religious laws — and often magical precepts as well — are conflated. Little by little, the domains that fall under distinct criteria disengage themselves from one another. New social circles form to govern these autonomous planes, which favors the free play of the person. Requirements grow more refined, become more rigorous. The mind becomes more sensitive to the call of the given, so as to integrate each object into the axiological order that suits it.

There is an evolution of values. The variations of evaluative thought are so profound that one might at first believe there is no fixed rule at work within it. But often one perceives, through these crises, invariants, functional constants, laws of change. It may be that everything is precarious within the sphere of constituted and formulated values. This very fluency is sometimes the reverse side of permanent constituting exigencies. Thus the evolution of a legislation may be governed by an identical aim, the history of a dogma by a normative intentionality. A perpetual renewal of expressions will be indispensable in order

to translate the unity of a theme through a series of complementary approximations — often antithetical, yet oriented according to a law.

According to M. Widmer, if man creates values, it is only under their constituted aspect. In order not to be arbitrary and disappointing, this creation implies regulative *ideas* of which man is no longer anything more than the 'bearer.' We clearly go beyond the empirical sense of the term 'idea' here.

'... As a phenomenon,' writes M. Édouard Le Roy, 'the idea is no longer anything... but a particular reality that forms part of the whole to be resolved, and which thereupon always calls for the same reductive explanation. The word "idea" must therefore here be understood as signifying, not a phenomenon of the intellectual order in the restricted sense of that latter word, but rather a value of light that can belong to any act whatsoever of thought: a truth-value pregnant with an original and autonomous exigency, the constitution of an ought-to-be, of a deserving-to-be endowed with a realizing power.'¹

M. Widmer thus rediscovers, after Lachelier,² one of the meanings of the Platonic intelligible. By that very fact, he encounters the problem of the genesis of eternal truths, which is one of the fundamental questions of philosophy. The current currency of this problem should no doubt not obscure for us its long and instructive history. One must no doubt go beyond the antinomy that opposes the creation of values by man to the identification of norms with the divinity. In the first case, they would risk exhausting themselves within immanence. In the second, they would dissolve into transcendence. But, in neither the one case nor the other, would they render the service expected of them, which is to consecrate or to qualify action. Values cannot simply be imposed upon man; in that case, indeed, they would have to be integrated in the light of an ideal intrinsic to the mind, and the question would simply rebound with regard to that ideal.

Values can be engendered by man in an act superior to psychological consciousness, but this must occur under the motion of the Unconditioned. This motion plays the role of a rule precisely by virtue of its very indetermination, but for this same reason one cannot call it a 'constituting value.' Values belong indivisibly to God and to man, within a common expansion. Binding together the created and the Uncreated within a single act, they are mediations.

Christianity presents itself precisely as a new mediation between man and God, as an intimate theandric relation or a theurgy at the heart of man, graciously granted to the sinful creature. Christ, together with the Church that prolongs him, actualizes this divine initiative, incarnating it within human becoming. In Nygren's phrase, Jesus Christ brings, above all, 'a new communion.' And it is this existential renewal of man that renders him capable of creating new values.

The believer's adherence to Christ is not, in the first place, the acceptance of a formulary and a code. It is a lived participation that necessarily engenders a manner of judging. Such clarity indeed discloses to the believer a precise situation: his condition as sinner, as redeemed, as called to divine union through a tradition, institutions, a history both general and personal. Dogmas are the invariants that structure this situation of the Christian. 'They reflect not only God's manner of being and acting, as his messengers reveal it to us, but also the human reactions that it arouses' (p. 90).

From these immutable norms unfold the multiple expressions of faith fecundating thought, which vary according to mentalities and the obstacles they encounter. Confessions of faith, theological expositions, liturgies, works, and productions of Christian art are the constituted aspects of which the dogmas are the constituting laws.

All judgments commanded by faith are evaluations irreducible to the light of reason alone. These evaluations do not overturn natural norms, but confer upon them a new and incommensurable dimension that resides, in the first place, in the one who evaluates.

Just as dogmas are not the very thoughts of God himself, but the rigorous translation of a quite special relation between the divine Existence and that of man, so too values — even those of the Christian — are not God. They mark a 'taking hold' of man by God, and a welcoming of God by man. This is why only one who consents to actualize this communion can judge of them. Whoever refuses faith and withdraws from this welcome interrupts the participation and dries up the source of the higher values.

The axiologist can therefore not be neutral if he wishes to have competence regarding the norms of the Christian as such, and regarding the ultimate foundation of all norms. Philosophy cannot here substitute itself for theology, still less for the religious life. The function of reflection is not to determine the content of faith, but to give the believer a more acute consciousness of it. The philosopher will not subject faith to rational criteria (which would amount to rejecting it *a priori*), but he will bring to light what the believer's attitude spontaneously implies by way of criteria and method, and will lead the believer to judge himself anew.

But faith is not sufficient to put man in possession of the properly human values, precisely because they are human. To discover them, one must have recourse to situations, to data that each call for their own regional experience. In fact, each person has a vocation to unveil this or that order of values, to invent original rules and styles within a determinate domain. Invention is nothing if it does not bring forth new principles of judgment. The Christian possesses only a new power to invent certain values, and the secret of deepening them all. He discovers, indeed, their root in the 'person,' who is essentially referred to God, and he knows that the quality of evaluations depends on the quality of this relation.

Such is the measured conclusion at which M. Widmer arrives. He opposes the absorption of profane norms into religious values. He preserves the diversity of competencies and vocations. He brings out the inevitable relativity of our judgments and the share of human

initiative in the constitution of values. He finds the unity of these values not in a system, but in the mind that makes systems — a mind that is creative only in order to be recreated and regenerated itself.

Of course, there is a good way and a bad way of understanding theses as nuanced as these. The bad way would consist, for example, in privileging the ethical order to the point of making it the origin of all values. Morality envelops an ineluctable form of exteriority. The relation between man and God would be conceived on the model of horizontal intersubjective relations. One would believe one had found God in determinations that are merely recorded. Anthropocentrism would then rage all the more, precisely because one would believe oneself to have gained, at a single stroke, access to the point of view of God.

We believe we have shown that this is not the direction taken by M. Widmer. His formation, and his sense of spiritual exigencies and complexities, allow him to balance ‘pneumatism’ with the necessary ‘noetism.’

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Footnotes

p. 265 — 1. An octavo volume in the Bibliothèque théologique [Theological Library] series; preface by M. Arnold Reymond. Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1950, xix + 179 pp.

p. 266 — 1. Simone Pétrement, *Le dualisme dans l'histoire de la philosophie et des religions* [Dualism in the History of Philosophy and Religions]. Paris: Gallimard, 1946, pp. 86–89. 2. ‘To determine quantity, or to qualify conduct, is always an evaluation — the term “value” carrying at once a metrical and a normative signification.’ Joseph Moreau, *La construction de l'idéalisme platonicien* [The Construction of Platonic Idealism]. Paris: Boivin, 1939, p. 310.

p. 267 — 1. *Introduction à l'étude du problème religieux* [Introduction to the Study of the Religious Problem], pp. 78–79, cited by M. Widmer, p. 49. The emphasis is Le Roy's own. 2. Lalande, *Vocabulaire de la philosophie* [Vocabulary of Philosophy], s.v. ‘Idée’ (notes).